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Massimiliano Balduzzi:

Research in Physical Training for Performers

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ABSTRACT

This essay begins the process of contextualizing and analyzing Massimiliano Balduzzi's solo physical training practice by introducing six newly created video documents. It locates Balduzzi's work in a wider historical and artistic context – touching upon the work of Konstantin Stanislavski, Jerzy Grotowski, and Eugenio Barba, as well as acrobatics, martial arts, and Balinese dance – while arguing that the documented physical training constitutes an original research contribution to the field of embodied technique. The essay has three main purposes: First, to give verbal articulation to some important aspects of Balduzzi's practice, as he begins to teach more widely in New York City and beyond. Second, to test and develop a theoretical framework that conceives of embodied technique as a field of knowledge in which rigorously framed research can and does give rise to new knowledge in the form of new technique. Third, to explore the epistemological status of multimedia documentation through a focused case study. Each of these goals has the potential to expand and clarify current discussions of actor and performer training, movement analysis and documentation, and practice-as-research.

KEYWORDS

'I was amazed how what seemed like purely mechanical exercises could result in such a living, organic, subtle, colourful and expressive sequence of human behavior.'

Vasily Toporkov (2004, p. 98)

Documenting Embodied Technique

I recently recorded and edited six videos – 45 minutes in total – documenting the solo physical training practice of Italian performer, teacher, and director Massimiliano Balduzzi. This essay begins the process of contextualizing and analyzing Balduzzi's highly specialized approach to physical training and dynamic movement practice. My discussion will place the work documented in these videos within a wider historical and artistic context, touching upon the work of Konstantin Stanislavski, Jerzy Grotowski, and Eugenio Barba, as well as acrobatics, martial arts, and Balinese dance. I will argue that Balduzzi's approach to physical training constitutes an original research contribution in the field of embodied technique. Accordingly, this paper has three main goals: First, to give verbal articulation to some important aspects of Balduzzi's work, as he begins to teach more widely in New York City and beyond. Second, to test and develop a theoretical framework that conceives of embodied technique as a field of knowledge in which rigorously framed research can and does give rise to *new knowledge* in the form of *new technique*. Third, to explore the epistemological status of multimedia documentation through a focused case study. Each of these goals has the potential to expand and clarify current discussions of actor and performer training, movement analysis and documentation, and practice-as-research.

I met Balduzzi in 2008, when he moved to New York City following an intensive apprenticeship of more than ten years with two teachers based in Italy: Anne Zenour and Stefano Vercelli, both of whom were strongly influenced by their work with Jerzy Grotowski in the 1980s. Balduzzi refers to Zenour and Vercelli as his 'masters', indicating the quality of sustained, full-time apprenticeship that characterized his work with each of them. Additionally, in 2006, Balduzzi spent six months training with two gurus in Bali, learning Balinese dance from

I Made Bukel and voice from I Njoman Tchandri.[1] Born in 1976 in a small Italian village, Balduzzi graduated from the University of Bologna in 2002 and subsequently formed the theatre company Teatro della Pioggia (Theatre of Rain) with Zenour in Tuscany. In 2008, he moved to New York City, where he and I worked in close collaboration until 2012, teaching together and presenting a number of formal and informal performances. Since the most intensive period of our collaboration has ended, Balduzzi has initiated new collaborative relationships with contemporary theatre, dance, and music artists including Helga Davis, Daria Fain, Arturo Vidich, and Samita Sinha. Balduzzi and I were Artists-in-Residence together at the Judson-based organization Movement Research and the Leimay/Cave studio in Brooklyn. Most recently, Balduzzi was selected to participate in the Fresh Tracks artist residency program at New York Live Arts.[2] Tellingly, Balduzzi's work in New York City has found most support among dance organizations despite his primary identification as a theatre artist.

Ambiguities of genre and purpose are inescapable when analyzing an embodied practice like Balduzzi's. It is not simply that the categories of theatre, dance, and performance fail to capture the range of meanings at work in the practice; rather, the concept of training itself is insufficient. John Matthews has recently attempted to extend the notion of 'training for performance' to include practices such as physical therapy and monasticism, which take place beyond the bounds of the performing arts as traditionally conceived (Matthews 2011). Like Matthews's *askeology,* Peter Sloterdijk's philosophical study of 'the practicing life' of *askesis* and 'anthropotechnics' takes physical training and virtuosity as a starting point from which to consider all varieties of embodied discipline (Sloterdijk 2013). However, a practice like Balduzzi's is not simply a continuation of existing traditions or forms. Rather, it is the result of sustained research and discovery. In other words, Balduzzi has not simply borrowed from and combined the approaches of his mentors but has also made original contributions that open up new directions and possibilities. My goal in this paper is to assess Balduzzi's work from a specifically epistemological perspective – that is, in terms of his contributions to a field of knowledge. To accomplish this, I draw upon two very different types of research output: my written testimony of our shared practice and the six videos Balduzzi and I produced in February

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[1] The word guru can be translated as 'teacher' and is not here intended to convey additional associations of spiritual leadership. However, like Balduzzi's use of 'master' for Zenour and Vercelli, such terms may raise productive questions about differing approaches to mentorship and pedagogy across region, period, and culture.
[2] Movement Research: <movementresearch.org>; and see Burt 2006. Leimay/Cave: <cavearts.org>. New York Live Arts (formerly Dance Theater Workshop): <newyorklivearts.org>.

2013. The reader is invited to examine these two sources in parallel, looking for how they corroborate – or may also work against – each other.

Claims to research and knowledge production are increasingly common in the field I am calling 'embodied technique'. However, in the context of theatre, dance, and performance scholarship, such claims remain controversial. It may therefore not immediately be clear what I mean when I refer to Balduzzi's embodied practice as 'research' and suggest that he has contributed new knowledge to an epistemic field. Borrowing the basic epistemological principles of academia (which I take to be the principal – though by no means the only – institution dedicated to research and knowledge transmission), I assume that research in any field may be assessed according to its originality and significance. The criterion of originality refers to the discovery of something genuinely new; while the criterion of significance pertains to actual or expected impact, both within a community of specialists and upon the world at large. The claim I wish to make here is small but rigorous: that new technique, such as that which is demonstrated in the cited videos, constitutes an original research outcome. I will not argue here that Balduzzi's work has achieved any particular level of significance in terms of its wider impact. As Robin Nelson has recently observed, 'to set the bar for *new knowledge* at the level of the paradigm shift is to set it too high', since paradigm shifts 'are rare – and, indeed, often not recognized in their own time' (2013, p. 27, italics original). But Nelson goes on to reject a 'traditional model of research' – 'progressive' and 'incremental' – in which 'the aim is to add another small stone to the cairn built up over the years' (p. 99). In contrast, I argue here that relatively modest and incremental contributions are precisely indispensable in producing and sustaining a field of embodied knowledge.

My analysis of Balduzzi's work through these six video documents relies upon a particular understanding of technique as knowledge. To offer a comprehensive theory of technique is beyond the scope of this essay.[3] However, it is worth noting here that the word technique has long been associated with the merely mechanical or formulaic aspects of artistic production and opposed to a kind of genius or inspiration that exceeds it. This negative idea of technique dates back to its first English usage in 1817 (George 2007) and has since been taken

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[3] This is the subject of my current book manuscript in progress, where I provide the foundations of an epistemology of embodied practice. For a general sense of how I employ the terms 'epistemic' and 'epistemology', see Cetina (1999 and 2001). In the simplest terms, epistemic refers to a practice that seeks or works with knowledge, while epistemology is the philosophical or theoretical discussion of what it means for a practice to be epistemic. I view technique as epistemic in that it constitutes knowledge in a rigorous sense. Thus, my discussion of technique in this essay is epistemological.

up in the field of actor training by Grotowski and others. Hence, Balduzzi's assertion that 'there is no such thing as Balduzzi Technique' is very Grotowskian. (All quotations from Balduzzi are from an interview I conducted on 15 March 2013.) Even Barba, who is responsible for some of the boldest cross-cultural analysis of performance technique (Barba and Savarese 1991), harshly denigrates what he refers to as the 'myth of technique' (1972, p. 49). There is, however, another genealogy of technique: one that originates in the Greek *techne* and passes through the writings of Marcel Mauss, Michel Foucault, and others. This is the sense in which I understand technique as fundamentally epistemic (although not positivist). The question at hand, then, is how to analyze the six cited video documents at the level of technique, in terms of the transmissible knowledge that structures the practice they document.

These six videos take an intentionally narrow focus on just one aspect of Balduzzi's work: his solo physical training. They take the form of a *work demonstration*, being precisely composed in order to most clearly demonstrate the results of a particular line of research in embodied technique. In this case, the videos are designed to allow the viewer to perceive the layering of technique in a process that develops gradually from simpler to more complex elements. I maintain that this represents a distinct documentary project from the recording of performances, workshops, or classes. While performances, workshops, and classes certainly demonstrate technique, they are also expected to stand alone as satisfying events for spectators and/or participants. If there is a conflict of interest between these two priorities, the artist or teacher is under considerable pressure to maintain the coherency of the event. The practitioner who undertakes a 'demonstration of work', on the other hand, gives highest priority to the clear presentation of technique. As a result, videos like those cited here constitute epistemic documents – analogous to scholarly publications – in a way that recordings of performances, workshops, and classes do not.[4]

Because my purpose is to establish the originality of Balduzzi's practice *as research*, and to highlight the importance of such research in sustaining an epistemic field, my focus here will not be on the threads of historical influence that inform his work. Instead, the challenge I confront is that of assessing a given practice through reference to an archive of citable video

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[4] Balduzzi and I have discussed the possibility of future projects that would document the physical partner work he introduced to me during the development of our collaborative performance *PLAYWAR* (2009-2012), as well as his group physical training, his individual vocal work, and his directorial and artistic work. I believe it will be easier to face the complexities of such hybrid epistemic-artistic documentation projects after having produced a sound exemplar of a more narrowly focused research output.

documents. It would of course be possible to situate Balduzzi's work in relation to a network of historical lineages. In that way, one might argue for the significance of his research from a diachronic, backward-looking perspective, on the basis of the established eminence of his influences. However, I prefer to assess Balduzzi's work in a synchronic and forward-looking manner, by isolating and evaluating his original contributions to the field of embodied technique. In other words, I wish to move away from an emphasis on historical influence, which can be traced back to 'mid-eighteenth-century interest in originality and genius' and 'still bears the marks of that origin' (Clayton and Rothstein 1991, pp. 3-4). Additionally, with respect to actor training, too much significance has traditionally been placed on the authenticity of transmission. I therefore propose a course correction towards a reconsideration of embodied practice as an epistemic field in which diverse practices may be compared via technical analysis, with considerations of historical influence playing a secondary role at most. This, I argue, would constitute an *epistemic* rather than a cultural-historical approach to embodied practice.

Six Video Documents

All references to audio-visual recordings in this essay refer to the following source: Balduzzi, Massimiliano (2013 #1-6b) 'Physical Training for Performers'. Edited by Ben Spatz. Video by Ben Spatz and Manuel de la Portilla. Leimay/Cave, February 2013. Online: Routledge Performance Archive <www.routledgeperformancearchive.com> (January 2014); and Vimeo <vimeo.com/album/2328479> (April 2013).

There are six videos in the set, with contents as follows:

2013 #1: 'First Sequence'. Exercise-actions: going down with the head; tiger/table walk; reaching up; jump with knees up.

2013 #2: 'Second Sequence'. Exercise-actions: going down to the side; flying leap; going to the floor with the knees; knight/chevalier.

2013 #3: 'Third Sequence'. Exercise-actions: going down to the back; 180°/360°; run and stop; heavy jump.

2013 #4: 'Floor Work'. Exercises adapted from Odin Teatret.

2013 #5: 'Isolations/Impulses'. Impulses from isolated body parts, shifting from small to large; rhythmic footwork.

2013 #6: 'Open Work'. Combined sequence using all preceding elements.

2013 #6b: 'Open Work (with commentary)'. Same as video #6, but with audio commentary by Massimiliano Balduzzi and Ben Spatz.

Citation protocols for online multimedia documents are still catching up to the growing complexity of digital resources. There is not yet an established protocol for citing specific sections of videos using time code. This essay cites video number and time code as follows: 'Balduzzi 2013 #3, tc. 3:00-3:15'.

Exercises/Actions

We can begin an analysis of the documented practice by examining how the six videos relate to and build upon one another. The first three videos (Balduzzi 2013 #1-3) show three different sequences of what Balduzzi calls 'exercise-actions'. Each sequence consists of four exercise-actions, which can be categorized as follows: a way to go down to the floor; a way to move or travel in space; a way of jumping or leaping; and one other. In each video, the exercise-actions are first shown separately, in their clearest and most purely physical form,

before being linked together in an increasingly dynamic flow. The fourth video (#4) shows floor work: a series of ways of moving and traveling in low positions, which Balduzzi suggests are primarily adapted from work of Odin Teatret (e.g., 1972b) via his mentor Stefano Vercelli. The fifth video (Balduzzi 2013 #5) shows a sequence of exercise-actions based in isolated impulses, beginning with precise movements of the eyes, moving outward into the arms and whole body, and concluding with rhythmic impulses through the feet. The sixth video (#6) brings together all previously shown elements in a fluid and dynamic session of 'open work'. This video is also available with continuous audio commentary from Balduzzi and myself (#6b). The architectural precision of Balduzzi's approach to physical training is evident in the clear structure of these videos and is one of the things that initially attracted me to his work. The documented practice is precise not only in its use of the geometric and energetic vectors of the body, and its handling of spatial relationships, but also in the clarity with which the work demonstration builds from apparently simple elements towards a more complex and integrated practice.

The hyphenated term 'exercise-action' indicates a productive tension between the precision, repeatability, and athleticism of 'exercise' and the imaginative freedom at work in the Stanislavskian-Grotowskian concept of 'action'.[5] For example, the exercise-action that Balduzzi calls 'going down with the head' (Balduzzi 2013 #1, tc. 0:12-2:42) is based on the principle of opposition. Balduzzi explains: 'Something – or someone – brings you down, and something else pulls you up. Technically, it's about finding the right kind of tension inside the body, what I call a *good tension*.' Here, the biomechanical principle of opposition or positive tension within the body is animated by associative content. According to Balduzzi, the 'exercise becomes an action when you start to ask: Why are you going down to the floor? Who is pushing you down? Or: Who is preventing you, blocking you, when you want to go down to the floor?' In other words, there is a dynamic relationship between the strong but flexible physical form of the movement and the associative content that animates it, transforming exercise into action.[6] Balduzzi describes a continuous interplay between these two poles, such that they alternate in taking

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[5] The lineage of this particular sense of 'action' is evident in the continuities linking Vasily Toporkov's memoir of Stanislavski (2004) to Thomas Richards's book on Grotowski (1995). These continuities, which I intend to discuss elsewhere at greater length, suggest an ongoing territory of embodied research.

[6] To clarify further: There is a difference between attempting to go down while someone tries to hold you up and attempting to stay up while someone pushes you down. Both types of opposition may result in the same general movement of the body moving towards the floor, but the site and quality of real and imagined tension are different. The difference can be felt directly by having a partner apply pressure to various body parts during movement.

precedence. 'As you can see in the videos, sometimes I am more focused on the technical details and sometimes I'm more free with the actions. In general, I try always to work on both of these at the same time: the exercise and the action. That's the goal. In a performance, you always have a technical score, a structure, and you have to live inside that.' The notion of 'living inside' a technical score recalls the language used by Grotowski to describe an actor's score, as in the well-known metaphors of the flame illuminating a glass or a river flowing through its channel (Schechner 2004: 47). However, the idea that a physical structure can be brought towards greater intensity or fullness through the engagement of a performer's imaginative faculties is hardly limited to Grotowskian practices.

According to Balduzzi, the actor should have or seek an active engagement with more or less free 'associations' during even the most apparently technical moments of practice. Here a claim of historical influence is probably warranted and may be traced to a particular moment in Grotowski's work, when the recollection or imagining of sometimes highly personal interactions and situations was combined with precisely structured movement, giving rise to what is arguably one of Grotowski's most important contributions to actor training. In a 1963 letter to Barba, Grotowski notes the significance of his recent 'introduction into all the exercises of the imaginative factor', leading to 'a concrete change in the exercises' (cited in Ruffini 2009, p. 98). During this period, Grotowski took what he knew of Stanislavski's work on memory and made it even more personal, emphasizing the secrecy of the actor's associations and drawing a stark division between the associations of the performer and those of the spectator. The canonical example of this division is Ryszard Cieslak's work on *The Constant Prince,* which involved a personal association that was not publicly revealed until more than two decades later, after the actor was no longer living, and even then only in general terms (see Ruffini, pp. 102-104). In Balduzzi's work, the premise of the secrecy of associations is maintained. In the context of my epistemological argument, however, the role of actual historical influence should remain secondary to an analysis of technical similarities. Balduzzi's practice regarding the secrecy of associations would be notably similar to that of Grotowski even if it were an independent discovery without any historical or biographical link.

In this case, however, Balduzzi recalls the importance of imaginative secrecy as a key feature of Zenour's leadership during their collaboration in Teatro della Pioggia, linking Zenour's practice to his own. 'The associations were never revealed. Anne was really clear in

that. I never ask the performer, or the students who work with me, to reveal their internal world. Not that I'm closed to talking with them if they need to, but definitely, during the work, in front of others, we don't talk about the associations.' Like any strong aesthetic or technical choice, the secrecy of associations closes off some avenues while opening others. One of the distinctive features of Grotowski's work was the strong distinction he drew between the perceptibility of movement and the privacy of imaginative association. In his last writings, Grotowski pushed this conceptual opposition to its logical extreme, characterizing theatrical composition as having two completely different sides or dimensions: the perception of the spectator and that of the performers or 'doers' (Grotowski 1995, p. 122). At least in this respect, Balduzzi carries forward a particular aspect of the technique that structured Grotowski's work over many decades.

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Photograph 8, with caption:

Massimiliano Balduzzi. Photo by Txuca. 'Emotion in Motion.' International Center of Photography in New York City, January 2011. Online: <www.txuca.com>.

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Irregularity of Rhythm

In addition to movement, opposition, and association, Balduzzi's practice is structured by a rich work on what he calls 'impulse', which for him is closely linked to the clarity with which an exercise-action begins and ends. 'Impulse and stop come together in my work,' Balduzzi says. 'There is a strong focus on the beginning and end of each action. If there is no impulse at the beginning, it's difficult to find a stop. And if you don't have the stop, then it's difficult to find the impulse to start again.' The relation of 'impulse' to 'stop' can be seen in Balduzzi's work on sequences of exercise-actions, as in the first three and sixth videos (Balduzzi 2013 #1-3, 6). While many other approaches to movement string together distinct movement elements – as in a choreographic combination or a biomechanics etude – Balduzzi places special emphasis upon, and draws particular advantage from, the insertion of a distinct 'stop' between each element in the sequence. This 'stop' is not a break, but rather a pause or suspension. It can be so short as to be nearly imperceptible and can eventually be removed at will. But it remains an important aspect of the training insofar as it demands a specific type of rhythmic

control. The work on the controlled 'stop' is a principle that functions across various aspects of Balduzzi's work and which he approaches in a variety of ways.

I first encountered the demand for dynamic, rhythmic control most forcefully in a simple but profound exercise-action called 'run and stop', which involves hurling oneself into a run and then coming to a full stop as quickly as possible (Balduzzi 2013 #3, tc. 3:00-3:15). Another version of this exercise-action, not documented here, involves two people hurtling towards each other and stopping just before they collide. These exercises are full-body, maximum-intensity training for what can eventually become a more subtle play of 'impulse and stop' within a sequence of exercise-actions. In conversation, Balduzzi links the work on impulse and the 'stop' to the final stillness that concludes a display of sport gymnastics. In such moments, all the power and energy generated in the course of a series of difficult, whole-body movements is forcefully concentrated into an instant of intensely active stillness. On a smaller scale, one may cultivate a similarly perceptible state of alertness or readiness in the moments between any series of perceptible movements. As Balduzzi explains, the pause or suspension – of whatever length – between elements allows for the appearance of an accent at the beginning of each exercise: a perceptible impulse, which likewise may be of any size.

The work on impulse and stops forms the basis for another aspect of Balduzzi's work that is less explicit in his teaching, but which I consider equally important. This is his approach to *irregular rhythm* as a basic dimension of variation for exercise-actions. While a student of Balduzzi may well hear the words 'opposition', 'association', 'impulse', and 'rhythm' during even the shortest workshop or class, the specific irregularity of the rhythms Balduzzi proposes is less overt. By irregular rhythm, I mean the opposite of a musical or regular rhythm in which successive beats set up a pattern of expectation. The dominant sense of rhythm in Balduzzi's training and practice is staccato and irregular, offering continual surprise rather than continuity and flow. What I am calling irregular rhythm is a physical equivalent of what musicians call syncopation, which David Temperley defines as 'a conflict between stress and metre' (1999, p. 30). In the present context, there is no suggestion of an underlying musical score against which rhythmic variation occurs; and still less of Temperley's distinction between 'composer' and 'performer' (p. 38). However, it could be that the irregularity of impulses in Balduzzi's physical practice unfolds against a backdrop of what Temperly would call a 'deep structure' of regular rhythm or metre, which the practitioner continually sets up in order to break.

Pedagogically, Balduzzi coaches performers to find a wide variety of rhythm within a single exercise-action. In an exercise-action like 'going down with the head', for example, rhythmic variation can be a source of tremendous freedom for the practitioner, while still maintaining the physical precision of the exercise – which as I have suggested involves both the external shaping and internal tensions of the body. Although Balduzzi's practice sometimes verges on continuous flow, it is primarily grounded in a strong, irregular, syncopated sense of rhythm that is full of surprise alternations, sudden tensions, and releases. Balduzzi's work on irregular rhythm is visible in the dynamics of 'run and stop', where it appears in perhaps its most basic form. But it can also be seen throughout the documented practice: in the exercise-actions, the floor work, the impulses/isolations, and the final 'open work'. Notably, in the work on impulses and isolations (Balduzzi 2013 #5), the exploration of rhythm takes precedence over the shaping of gesture and the direction of force. Rather than developing an alphabet or vocabulary of isolations, Balduzzi prioritizes the sharpness and clarity of the impulse across a range of movements from small to large.

In my view, Balduzzi's use of irregular rhythmic variation across this a range of movement technique marks a distinctive contribution to the field of actor training and to embodied technique more generally. I am not suggesting that the use of irregular rhythm is new to physical training or even to European physical theatre training. On the contrary, it is only by situating Balduzzi's work on rhythm in relation to other documented practices that we can meaningfully analyze his contribution to the field. For example, Daniel Mroz describes what seems to be a closely related phenomenon under the rubric of 'punctuation' – a term borrowed from Richard Fowler, a student of Barba (personal correspondence; and see 2011, p. 171). Mroz also points out that syncopation is a key element in some varieties of solo martial arts training (2011, p. 53), where it works against the risk of becoming predictable. One anonymous reviewer of this article even suggested a comparison between Balduzzi's 'stop' and the *mie* or 'pose' in Japanese Kabuki theatre. Certainly, technical links can be drawn between Balduzzi's practice and that of Barba, solo martial arts training, and perhaps even Kabuki. But what is the nature of such links? Can their significance be separated from the question of historical influence or coincidence, so that they can be analyzed as epistemic phenomena, as discoveries about certain concrete possibilities of practice?

To conduct a meaningful comparative study, we would need to be much more specific, referring not to 'Barba's work', 'Kabuki theatre', and 'martial arts' – three research areas of respectively increasing vastness – but to specific, documented examples of practice linked to particular times and places. Then it would become possible to ask the relevant epistemic question: *Is the technique that structures one practice the same as that which structures another?* Balduzzi explicitly links the 'stop' in his work to the suspended pause that follows a display of gymnastics, despite obvious differences in scale, shape, and purpose. I have never heard him mention the *mie* of Kabuki, but that does not render such a technical comparison irrelevant. Likewise, it is fairly obvious that the position of the limbs in the exercise-action called 'knight' or 'chevalier' (2013 #2, tc. 3:05-3:40) derives from Balinese dance. Less obvious to me was Balduzzi's suggestion that his 'jump with knees up' (2013 #1, tc. 4:25-4:55) was inspired by the movements of soccer players – but this may be because I have more training in Balinese dance than in soccer. The salient point here is that, from a technical-epistemic perspective, it may be less useful to enquire after the lineage of these similarities than to analyze them in sufficient detail so that they begin to resolve into meaningful technical distinctions. We can observe, for example, that in the cited videos, all of these elements – the impulses and stops, the position of the 'knight', the 'jump with knees up', and more – are animated by an approach to repetition and irregular rhythm that is as foreign to Balinese dance as it is to European soccer and sport gymnastics. Hence, as much as we can trace the borrowing or uptake of technique, we can also recognize a process of sustained investigation and elaboration that deserves to be called research insofar as it leads to genuinely new technique.

Photograph 9, with caption:
Massimiliano Balduzzi. Photo by Txuca. 'Emotion in Motion.' International Center of Photography in New York City, January 2011. Online: <www.txuca.com>.

Technique as Epistemic Depth

As noted above, claims to 'research' have grown increasingly common among practitioners of specialized embodied technique, even if such claims are often met with skepticism on the part of more traditional researchers in the humanities and sciences. Indeed,

Balduzzi describes his collaborative partnership and apprenticeship with Zenour as a sustained and focused period of research. During this time, Zenour directed productions in which Balduzzi performed, but the amount of time dedicated to research was proportionally massive in comparison with the number of premieres and performances. An entire year of work – eight to ten hours per day, five or six days per week – might be devoted to the creation of a piece that would only be performed a few times. Balduzzi observes: 'The quest, the process, searching – was in itself the goal.'

For my purposes, it is crucial to point out that this process of 'searching' was not limited to the discoveries of one person or to the capabilities or talents of an individual performer. Rather, it passed through a test of transmissibility, a crucial epistemological challenge to discover something that can be shared between and across bodies. Balduzzi recalls:

> With Anne, it was really a research. 'Okay, let's get into the room' – there were five or six of us – 'and let's discover different ways to walk, different ways to go to the floor, different ways to jump.' And we were searching for hours, many days, until we would get something. 'Okay, his jump is interesting.' It was a long process of discovering an exercise and then formalizing it. Let's say you go down to the floor with your head. Where is the principle? How does the spine work? Put all of that into a shape that can be passed along, that I can give to someone else. Notice how another person approaches the same exercise…

The articulation of personal practice as transmissible technique – testing what one person is doing in terms of how it can be shared with others – is a key epistemic moment in embodied research. Following the line of Stanislavski and Grotowski, Balduzzi has devoted years not to the cultivation of personal talent alone but also to the development of transmissible knowledge. (For another reference to the test of the 'transmittable', see Allain 1997, p. 66.) The importance of distinguishing such knowledge from individual talent is one of the reasons I argue for a retheorization of technique as a critical concept. Without such a concept, there is no way to distinguish between a special ability – which could be linked to the unique capacities of an individual – and a research outcome, which must be transmissible.

My claim here is that Balduzzi's practice is the result of sustained research and that the technique that structures it is genuinely new. To substantiate this claim, I need not suggest that no one has ever worked on 'impulses' and 'stops' before, or on the productive tension of the 'exercise-action', or on the use of 'irregular rhythms' in physical training. From a research perspective, such claims are absurd, since each of these terms already names an area of research in which numerous practitioners continue to work. In fact, it is precisely in relation to a landscape of previously existing embodied technique that it becomes possible to assess a given practice as constituting an original contribution to a field of knowledge. What methodological tools do we need in order to assess such a claim? How do we ascertain whether a given (print or video) document shows evidence of new technique? From the premise that technique is transmissible knowledge it follows that practices separated in time and space may be linked insofar as they are structured by the same or similar technique. We might then imagine technique as comprising numerous – probably countless – elements that are functionally equivalent across such distances. Elsewhere, I will argue that the equivalency of these elements rests on the relative reliability of embodiment, understood as a materiality to which we have continual but never finally objective access.[7] In the present context, I want only to clarify a particular aspect of technique, which I call its *epistemic directionality* or *depth.*

The epistemic depth of technique is most easily grasped as a temporal dimension in the training process: First you do this, then you do that. However, as I will show, such temporality is a matter of pedagogy rather than expert practice. We might also try to imagine epistemic depth using spatial metaphors, by visualizing technique as accruing or sedimenting in layers, or as a network of fractally branching pathways. In fact, the depth of technique is neither temporal nor spatial. Each 'next' or 'subsequent' step is located 'after' or 'beyond' the previous step not in space but in the pathways of practice. A few examples drawn from the above technical discussion may clarify these points.

I described opposition and association above as two major principles of Balduzzi's physical practice. But it is not hard to see that each of these is an area of embodied technique that unfolds within the even more basic premise of repeatable bodily movements. If we imagine Balduzzi's practice as structured by a set of relatively reliable pathways through practice, then

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[7] This assertion amounts to the philosophical position known as critical realism and will be further developed elsewhere. For a series of essays under the related banner of 'new materialisms', see Coole and Frost (2010).

opposition and association are territories of practice that arise only given that one has trod a preceding pathway of movement. It is the repetition of 'external' – that is, easily visible – movement forms that make possible Balduzzi's specific work on oppositions or tensions within the body. Likewise, it is the work on opposition within repeatable movement forms that makes possible an exploration of associations in the sense described above. Balduzzi's practice thus follows a particular technical pathway: from movement to opposition to association. The structure of the work demonstration as a whole makes this clear, with the physical forms of the exercises preceding their exploration as fully dynamic exercise-actions. However, the directionality of this pathway is not fundamentally temporal, because the practitioner can and does move back and forth along it, returning to focus on movement or opposition after association has already appeared. Rather, the directionality of the technique is established by the fact that movement is understood as a premise for association. In the documented practice, we encounter what appears to be movement work without associative content; but we do not find anything like a work on associations without physical movement. A practice that took imaginative content as its starting premise – only developing repeatable movement forms on the basis of such content – would be significantly different from that described here. In this sense, the term 'exercise-action' has directionality or depth.[8]

It is not difficult to find other examples of the epistemic directionality or depth of technique in Balduzzi's physical training practice. In the cited videos, individual exercise-actions are a necessary premise for the sequences they compose. The exercise-actions can be worked without the sequence, but the reverse (a sequence without elements) is not possible. Additionally, the practice documented in these videos is structured by a technical directionality in which the possibility of continual flow is premised upon a prior accomplishment of staccato, irregular rhythms punctuated by stops or suspensions. Irregular rhythm is the 'base' to which one returns, whereas other rhythms must be consciously chosen or attained. In each of these examples, the depth dimension is most easily grasped via the pedagogical situation: One learns the exercise-actions first and then puts them into a sequence, rather than learning the sequence

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[8] I do not mean to suggest that Balduzzi never works from thematic content towards precision of form. Actually, my experience of him as a director and co-creator of theatrical works has been exactly that. From a set of ideas and images, for example, he might work gradually to develop a set of repeatable forms. The theatrical process would then involve the same elements as the practice of 'training', but with a reversed directionality. Instead of exercise becoming action, the creative process would be structured by a technical pathway of action-becoming-exercise: What begins in the heat of play and interaction would have to be converted, through rehearsal and repetition, to the status of 'action-exercise'.

first and later digging into the precision of its constituent elements. Likewise, one works on irregularity in rhythm before eventually arriving to regularity or continual flow. Again, this directionality is not inherently temporal, nor is it impossible to imagine a practice that worked in the opposite way: from action to exercise; from sequence to isolated element; from continual flow to punctuated irregularity. Technique has epistemic depth because its constituent parts have an order – they are premised upon one another in specific hierarchies – rather than being combined in all possible ways and orders.

To evaluate a claim to originality in a research practice, one must take the directionality or depth of technical pathways into account. Where exactly the practitioner arrives depends on exactly how the layering of technique takes place. *The pathway matters.* The technical location of a given practice cannot be defined merely by a specific combination of elements; it is more like a traversal of pathways having directionality or depth. The structure of a 'work demonstration', then, makes the depth dimension explicit by laying out the technical structure of the process across time. The technical pathway – which is fundamentally epistemic rather than temporal – is spread out across the duration of the work demonstration so that an observer can see how the pieces fit together. Only a specialist with closely related expertise could watch the final video (Balduzzi 2013 #6) on its own and perceive its technical content in pathways or layers. Arguably, the purpose of the preceding videos (#1-5) is to lay out the epistemic depth at work in the final video. Of course, no work demonstration can hope to capture or articulate all of the technique at work in any given moment of practice. Another observer might highlight other technical pathways that structure the final video of 'open work'. Balduzzi's work demonstration is notable for its clarity, however, and for that reason could serve as a useful example of a research output in the field of embodied technique.

Photograph 10, with caption:
Massimiliano Balduzzi. Photo by Txuca. 'Emotion in Motion.' International Center of Photography in New York City, January 2011. Online: <www.txuca.com>.

Mapping the Field

The spatial metaphor elaborated here, according to which relatively reliable pathways through practice define the technical 'spaces' in which further practice occurs, may appear unnecessarily reductive to some. I certainly do not mean to imply that these pathways can be comprehensively mapped. However, the spatial metaphor is useful for illustrating the relationship between technique, practice, and research. If technical pathways bring the practitioner to a particular 'space' of possibility, then research in technique is precisely the discovery of previously unknown pathways within that space. These pathways are preexisting in the sense that the researcher encounters them in the space rather than inventing them freely. Yet they may also be genuinely unknown, in the sense of never having been practiced before. In this sense, every technical pathway defines a space for additional research. An elementary pathway – think of 'action' or 'rhythm' – defines a major research area in which it would be difficult to discover something new because so much work has already been done. A more complex pathway, on the other hand – e.g., irregular rhythm within a sequence of exercise-actions – defines an apparently small area in which further research may well lead to discovery. My suggestion above that technical pathways are 'fractally branching' indicates that such an area is only apparently rather than epistemically 'small'. It appears small because it has not been thoroughly explored. Like any area of knowledge, its size increases through research (Cetina 2001).[9]

Understanding technique as having depth in this sense allows us to recognize Balduzzi's practice as *research*, in addition to any other functions it may have. The practice documented in the cited videos may serve Balduzzi as physical exercise, spiritual discipline, pedagogical framework, and more. It may be useful as a kind of general actor or performer training, or in the development of specific theatrical performances. More fundamentally, however, it is an exploration of a particular space of practical possibility: a research project in a territory of embodied technique that is as well-defined as the precision of its repeatable structure. As Jonathan Pitches has recently observed, the academic concept of 'practitioner knowledge' and the proliferation of 'training research' bring with them a set of related questions and problems. Perhaps most crucially, for the developing field of practice-as-research: 'What distinguishes the

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[9] With this in mind, we can define technique in precise terms as *knowledge of relatively reliable pathways through practice*. Mapping these pathways of reliable possibility as spatial dimensions gives us something like the concept of 'phase space' in physics. Applied not to 'the body' as object but to the reliability of practical pathways, embodied technique can be conceived as a highly complex phase space.

everyday work of an investigative practitioner from activity that might, with some confidence and justification, be called research?' (Pitches et al. 2011, p. 138). I hope the analysis offered here has convinced the reader that the practice documented in these cited videos deserves to be called research in the most rigorous sense of that term, as well perhaps as providing the basics of a theoretical toolkit for analyzing embodied technique as knowledge.

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that an epistemic mapping of practices can and must traverse the borders of region and culture that are often used to define areas of scholarly inquiry. This should not be confused with a return to positivist, structuralist, or semiotic approach, for I am not suggesting that any kind of universal structure or code underpins embodied practice. Technique is not a final diagram of possibility but a provisional mapping of discovered pathways, which are only ever *relatively* reliable. In the present context, my aim is simply to acknowledge that technique can be functionally equivalent without being historically continuous. As noted above, there are several cultural and historical contexts in which Balduzzi's work could be productively situated for comparative analysis: the Italian 'third theatre', including the work of Zenour and Vercelli; the Grotowski diaspora in Italy, Europe, and beyond; the continuing influence of Asian dance and martial arts upon European physical theatre and physical culture more generally; and, most recently, dance and contemporary performance in New York City. In each of these cases, it is possible to trace actual lines of historical influence: from Grotowski via Zenour; from Barba via Vercelli; from the tradition of Balinese dance via I Made Bukel; etc. Such tracings would allow us to map Balduzzi's practice in terms of its explicit sources. However, such a map stops at the borders of biographical influence. What about parallels and connections to practices that Balduzzi has not encountered and of which he may not be aware? At a certain point, it is no longer useful to ask whether such similarities are due to historical influence or not. If embodied practice is, as I propose, structured by knowledge in the form of technique, then people working in different and unconnected contexts may discover the same relatively reliable pathways independently. This would amount to something like parallel discovery in the sciences, as in the famous example of Newton and Leibniz (Simonton 1979). We therefore cannot not assume historical influence when we encounter similarities in technique. Moreover, when mapping epistemic territory – an

essential premise for the framing of embodied research – the important question is not where technique comes from but how it works and what it does.[10]

This distinction is important when it comes to questions of naming and lineage. When a practice is dubbed 'Stanislavskian' or 'Grotowskian', we must ask whether this refers to its point of origin or to its technical structure. A practice that was originally inspired by the work of Stanislavski or Grotowski might develop to the point where it bears little or no relation, at the level of technique, to the practices overseen by those individuals. On the other hand, a practice could involve close technical parallels to the work of Stanislavski or Grotowski without the existence of any historical link – to say nothing of distinctions in the relative depth at which such similarities in technique may be found. I consider Balduzzi's work 'Grotowskian' more in the latter than in the former sense, despite the existence of strong historical links in this case. When I watch the cited videos of Balduzzi's physical training alongside the well-known videos of Ryszard Cieslak leading a work session at the Odin Teatret (Odin Teatret 1972a), I am not looking for proof of influence, or lack thereof, but for indications of technical similarity and difference. Both recordings document a solo physical training practice developed in a theatrical context. Both follow a basic structure in which a series of elements are first presented individually and then looped and repeated. As the order and duration of each element becomes more variable and dynamic, the practice shifts from a series of exercises towards a flow of actions. From an epistemic perspective, the important question is not why these practices share these features – historical influence or parallel discovery? – but where else we might find the same technique at work, perhaps beyond the reach of any historical ties.

In comparison with Cieslak's demonstration of training at the Odin, Balduzzi's sequences of exercise-actions involve a wider range of aesthetics and effort qualities. The requirement to maintain a controlled 'stop' between each element allows for more extreme variation in kind between them. This makes Balduzzi's physical training highly adaptable, since individuals can create their own sequences based either on specific training goals – such as strengthening particular physical capabilities – or on thematic content aimed towards the creation of a theatre piece. Balduzzi's use of irregular rhythm throughout also distinguishes the cited videos from

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[10] This point resonates with Barba's notion of 'extra-daily technique', for example in the cross-cultural analysis of opposition (see Barba and Savarese 1991). However, the theoretical framework developed here differs from that of Barba's theatre anthropology in that it does not look for a single set of unifying principles. Rather than seeking to unify diverse performance traditions, an epistemological analysis of technique makes thinkable the radical diversity of embodied practices.

those of Cieslak. We should not think of these differences as improvements or degradations, as if Cieslak and Balduzzi were bound together in a chronological progression towards or away from perfection. (This is the old 'myth of technique' that Barba rightly criticized.) Instead, we should evaluate the two videos as distinct but related research outcomes in a particular subfield of embodied technique. From a training perspective, each technical element is an established pathway to be learned, practiced, and mastered. From a research perspective, on the other hand, each element defines a research area with its own promises of discovery.

As in any active research, Balduzzi's practice continues to change in response to his own interests and circumstances. When I met him in 2008, intensive physical training in irregular rhythm – for example, through the 'run and stop' exercise-action, which demands repeated, whole-body acceleration and deceleration – was central to Balduzzi's teaching and practice. This had a transformative effect on me, answering a deep need in my own work, and I continue to practice it today. At present, however, such physical intensity is less often the focus of Balduzzi's pedagogy, which over the past four years has become softer and gentler. The reasons for this shift are at once pedagogical, aesthetic, personal, and spiritual. As Karin Knorr Cetina reminds us, we should not ignore the 'libidinal dimension' of knowledge production, the force that 'binds' the researcher – scientific or otherwise – to the object of research and provokes research as a 'creative and constructive practice' (2001, pp. 186, 182). In the context of Balduzzi's ongoing practice and research, this article – and the videos it cites – should not be seen as a stopping point or summation, but as a single point or research output along a pathway of discovery. It is a marking or trace of a particular moment that can serve as a starting or reference point for future projects, whether led by Balduzzi or by someone else.

Photograph 11, with caption:

Massimiliano Balduzzi. Photo by Txuca. 'Emotion in Motion.' International Center of Photography in New York City, January 2011. Online: <www.txuca.com>.

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